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Review

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THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS. By W. N. Gemmill. Chicago: A. C. McClurg. 1924. Pp. iv, 240.

Judge Gemmill has written an interesting account of the Salem witch trials of 1692. In a half dozen short chapters which are introductory in nature he reviews the history of witchcraft, indulges a few comments on puritan character, and describes briefly conditions at Salem when the witch delusion began. Then follow eighteen chapters devoted to the trials themselves. As far as possible the narratives have been constructed from the original records of the trials. They are repetitious, in consequence, but it is well that the record be complete.

It is an astounding tale and one difficult to appreciate adequately unless the reader school himself to catch a viewpoint of more than two centuries ago. Salem was a village of 1,700 souls. There were no public schools. Most of the inhabitants were illiterate. Rum drinking was prevalent. Everybody was superstitious. It was a time when even the President of Harvard College believed in witchcraft.

Neither magistrates nor ministers of the gospel were capable of seeing the hideous folly of it all. Of the nine judges who presided at the Salem witch trials, one was "a man of ability, but a bigot of the worst type." Another was "honest, but weak and vacillating." Another was "utterly unfit," "a vain, shallow sycophant." Another was "a firm believer in witchcraft" and "presumed all the accused guilty before their trials began." The rest were weak and ignorant men. And the ministers, who contributed so much to the common madness, were no better than the judges.

An illegal court sat from May 27, 1692, to September 24, 1692. More than two hundred persons were arrested, many were convicted, and over one hundred remained in prison when the tribunal finally adjourned. In one hundred and twenty days the court sent twenty people to the gallows.

It is well that Judge Gemmill has thus made available for everyone, in a narrative as interesting as it is significant, the story of this strange delusion. We may understand our Puritan forefathers a little better for having read it. And some recent criminal trials, rather badly conducted, as it seemed to many, will at least stand the shock of comparison. After all we have been getting on in these things since the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock.

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WORKING MANUAL OF ORIGINAL SOURCES IN AMERICAN GOVERNMENT. By Milton Conover. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press. 1924. Pp. vii, 135.

The author has performed a real service in taking this step in the direction of "a case method in Political Science." The plan of the manual presents problems and assigns source materials for classes in college and university courses in American government to supplement the usual text-book.